

“You’re the butterfly people”

The advert said ‘volunteers wanted for conservation task in Europe’. I’m not sure what motivated me to apply, was it? To make new friends? Escape my stressful life? To face a personal challenge? to experience something new ? To help conservation? Or was it a moment of madness?

I was offered the trip to the Czech republic, I signed up, paid my deposit & suddenly felt very scared.

The day of the trip arrived; Nigel & Kathy (our organisers) picked us up en route for Dover. We were 15 near strangers all sharing a minibus, going on a ferry to Calais.

It was great fun trying to find our way to the campsite; we pitched up, near Mons in Belgium, and finally relaxed. I felt the group was bonding, we had pizza, a birthday and a beer – a perfect recipe – we had lots of laughs! Which continued throughout the trip.

In the morning we de-camped in a frantic race, to beat the impending rain, with thunder & lightening overhead, it was hysterical!

The storm seemed to follow us to Germany; it raged again later that night as we camped at Wertheim. The site was beautiful with tall silver birches, sitting beside the river Main with swans & boats passing by, & overhead birds singing & doing their thing.

In the morning we had pastries from the bakers van & steaming coffee, before de-camping our wet & wind swept tents.



Camping at Wertheim Germany

Our next stop was to be Krems in Austria. As we travelled, we found ourselves mutually enjoying the ever changing landscape & diversity of wildlife seen en route, from urban industrial, to rolling hills, forest, fields of wheat, corn & acres of blazing yellow sunflowers all faces o the sun. We saw honey buzzards, roe deer, kestrels hares & storks to name a few. I found myself actively looking to see what I could spot, rather than waiting for a keener eye to point it out to me.

We found ourselves winding our way beside the river Danube, through stunning scenery & beautiful architecture.

We crossed the river & had great fun pitching up on a tiny space under apple trees & yes that meant clearing the windfalls first – a bit too lumpy to sleep on!

We had a great meal at a local restaurant & a huge laugh interpreting the menu & trying the local food & beer. This would be our last night camping & it couldn’t have been more idyllic – beside the Danube. I sat on the rivers edge looking across it at Krems with it’s church & castle nestled in the hillside, I watched cargo & cruise boats on their own travels & saw a hummingbird hawkmoth gathering nectar on the flowers nearby. It all felt very peaceful.



View of Krems across the Danube

beautiful architecture of Krems

The next morning we had breakfast in Krems, with the most delicious apricot jam & fresh bread, & continued on through Austria until we finally arrived in Zdanice. After being met & having lunch with our two Czech partners David & Zuzka in Kyjov.

We were all tired from travelling & settled into our comfortable accommodation at the football club with shared rooms & a pool!



Our lovely pool

The days that followed were non-stop!

It consisted primarily & most importantly with the work – our area was a vast meadow at the foots of the Zdanice forest – this meadow was the perfect habitat for a wide range of insects & plants, but the habitat was being destroyed & taken over by the encroaching, blackthorn, robinia/acacia, hawthorn, dog rose & field maple. Our job was to clear it all & help restore its natural balance.

We were supplied with tools – for me loppers & bow saw – given advice, instruction & told to start. I went into it with gusto & soon realised it was hot, sweaty hard work!
That ‘moment of madness’ thought came back to me – ‘what was I doing’? – I thought it was going to kill me!!
We spent our days, often joined by Czech volunteers, working in the heat, on a slope, getting scratched, bruised & tired. Respite came with breaks of delicious cakes & lots of water. Stopping for home made lunches at Honza & Marketta’s bar, often followed by a power nap.



Grace hard at work

exhausted after a mornings work

We found ourselves being filmed by local television & having features in the local paper – we felt like celebrities! One evening whilst at dinner Ruth & I were bought a drink from a man at the next table, he said something in Czech, flapped his arms about & gave us a thumbs up! The waiter interpreted for us – ‘he says’, “you’re the butterfly people, he’s seen the TV & newspaper, and he wanted to buy you both a drink, because he says what you are doing is a good thing”

It was at this point, I realised, I really did care about our work, the meadow, & the wildlife it was supporting & that it really meant something to me, because it clearly meant something to this local man who’d bought us the drink in recognition.



Our meadow nearly cleared

We were also very privileged to have the advice & endless knowledge which came from visiting entomologists, professors, & local experts, who showed us nature reserves, flora & fauna identification & the local ecology. You couldn't help but be interested & fascinated!



Swallowtail butterfly

pearl bordered fritillary

We learned about the Czech way of life it's culture & history; we were taken to the museums, local festivals & celebrated with the locals by dancing until late. On our last night we had a party thrown in our honour by the mayor, with music, dancing, food & copious amounts of wine from their 16th century cellar – it was priceless!

At the end of the 17 days, our time came to leave – I felt sad but at the same time, I felt it was time to go as we'd achieved our aim.

We were to make our own way back by train, as Nigel & Kathy were moving on to their next project in Hungary. We boarded at Brno, & travelled to Prague, had fun up & down the carriages trying to find our seats. We were all very tired & some slept on the train, but I couldn't miss the changing landscape that was passing us by. The train followed the Danube, where strange rocky formations jutted into the sky, & beautiful coloured houses dotted on the hillside. It was also great seeing all the different trains & stations – in particular the amazing glass station at Berlin.



Berlin station

We had the fun of an overnight sleeper train from Berlin to Brussels – such a laugh with six berth couchettes & luggage to fit in as well as ourselves!
And to top it all we got to travel on euro star – a little comfort after the briquette – sorry I meant couchette...



All tired waiting for euro star

euro star about to leave

As the final destination loomed I found myself reflecting on the trip & what stood out the most for me – it was all amazing but I think above all it had to be the warm & friendly people we met, everyone made us feel so welcome & treated us like friends. I've always had faith for mankind in this troubled world we live in, & the Czech people certainly confirmed that for me. I also reflected on my original motivations for applying for the trip – I'm still not sure, but what I do know is;



I achieved a personal challenge.

I did experience something new.
I did escape my stressful life (for a short time)
I did meet new people who have become friends.
And I have learnt more about our environment, ecology & the need for conservation.
As for a moment of madness??

It would have been a moment of madness if I hadn't done it!!



Our fantastic group

Go on find out more, you know you want to – see below for the really important stuff!

The European conservation action network (EUCAN) was established in 2007 by the Kingcombe trust, a charity based at the Kingcombe centre in west Dorset, dedicated to conservation & environmental education (reg charity no; 1054758) in association with the Dorset branch of butterfly conservation. The project is funded through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European union lifelong learning programme & has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech republic & Poland.

Further information & an application form can be obtained from; Nigel spring to; 0044196323559 / nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk or www.kingcombecentre.org.uk